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ONLINE AIR QUALITY FORECASTS DEBUT JUST IN TIME FOR "SMOG SEASON"

MTBE PHASE-OUT MAY BE FACTOR IN INCREASED SMOG LEVELS THIS SUMMER, SAYS MDAQMD CHIEF

Victorville -- Just in time for annual "smog season," officials at the Mojave Desert Air Quality Management District (MDAQMD) have announced the online debut of real-time air quality readings, ozone forecasts and "ozone maps" tailored to the High Desert. This vital air quality information can now be accessed via the internet seven days a week, 24 hours a day by logging onto the local air agency's website at www.mdaqmd.ca.gov.

With the click of a mouse, visitors to the MDAQMD's website can now access daily ozone forecasts for High Desert communities, as well as near real-time air quality levels measured at seven air monitoring stations located throughout the District's 20,000 square mile jurisdiction. The District's website also contains a link to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's animated ozone maps, which track the formation and movement of ozone in areas across the country, including the Mojave Desert.

Based on the higher than normal ozone levels that have been recorded throughout Southern California this past week, the MDAQMD's automated online forecasts may be "just what the doctor ordered," particularly for persons who are unusually sensitive to smog. Just last week, the South Coast Air Quality Management District (SCAQMD) - the regulatory air agency for the Los Angeles basin, Orange County and non-desert portions of San Bernardino and Riverside counties – issued its first Stage I smog alert in five years, for the Crestline-Lake Arrowhead area. Local air districts issue a Stage 1 alert when ozone levels exceed .20 parts per million (ppm) or 200 on the Air Quality Index. During Stage 1 alerts, sensitive persons – such as children, who are at highest risk from ozone exposure because they spend a large part of summer outdoors – are strongly advised to limit outdoor activity.

Unlike the SCAQMD, the MDAQMD has not even come close this summer to shattering its own seven-year, Stage 1-free record. Nonetheless, due largely to prevailing winds from the southwest which transport L.A.'s smog into the High desert via the San Bernardino Valley, the MDAQMD has logged higher than normal smog levels this summer within its jurisdiction, which includes the Victor Valley, 29 Palms, Barstow and Blythe. To date, the highest ozone concentration recorded in the Mojave Desert is a.16 ppm reading, logged in Hesperia on July 11. In comparison, last year's highest ozone level was .14 ppm, while in 2001, .15 ppm was the maximum concentration recorded. Additionally, three days this summer have exceeded the one-hour federal ozone standard (0.12 ppm) within the MDAQMD. Nonetheless, the High Desert's ozone readings compare favorably with those recorded within the SCAQMD, which has logged 36 federal exceedances this summer so far.

Ultimately, the severity of the High Desert's smog season is dependent on air pollution levels in the South Coast Air Basin, according to Chuck Fryxell, Air Pollution Control Officer for the MDAQMD. "When the L.A. basin experiences high ozone days, ozone levels in the High Desert increase correspondingly, albeit at a fraction of the concentrations experienced 'down the hill, " according to Fryxell. Fryxell adds that the "gradual phase-in of alternatives to MTBE in California's gasoline – combined with a slight 'El Nino' effect this year - may be the largest contributing factor to this summer's higher than normal ozone levels."

While further emissions reductions from mobile sources will help reduce ozone levels in the years to come, air districts must take the lead in implementing creative new solutions for curbing pollution, according to Fryxell. Such strategies could include the establishment of a procedure for implementing interbasin emission credit transfers, whereby pollution reduction credits generated by companies located in upwind basins could be sold to companies located in downwind basins, which are adversely affected by transported smog. A procedure for implementing such a system "would provide a strong incentive for businesses in the upwind air basin to reduce their emissions, while paving the way for businesses to relocate in credit-hungry, downwind areas, such as the High Desert," stated Fryxell, adding that such a system would create a "win-win" air quality situation for air agencies such as the SCAQMD and the MDAQMD.

To learn more about the High Desert's air quality and how you can help protect it, call the MDAQMD at (760) 245-1661.

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